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Report Part Title: YEMEN'S ARMIES FROM OTTOMAN RULE TO UNIFICATION

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Report Author(s): Zoltan Barany
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I. YEMEN'S ARMIES FROM OTTOMAN RULE TO UNIFICATION

Yemen's ancient past is no less a fascinating subject than its Islamic history that began in 630 AD with the Prophet sending his cousin to Sana'a, which was then the most advanced part of Arabia. For the next 900 years, Yemen was governed by several dynasties until the arrival of the Ottomans. The Zaydi Imams (later kings) of Yemen's northern highlands did not recognize the 1905 Anglo-Ottoman border agreement. Zaydism is a branch of Shia Islam that stresses the presence and activism of an Imam, who is supposed to be not only knowledgeable of the religion but also the head of a community and, if necessary, a leader on the battlefield.[6] They were sovereign rulers of their domain from about 1911 – based on an agreement with the Ottomans who withdrew in 1918 – until overthrown by their own army in 1962. Prior to unification in 1990, the armies of both pro-Western North Yemen and pro-Soviet South Yemen were often behind the seemingly unending cycles of political violence and civil war.

Soldiers in Yemen Under the Ottoman and British Empires

The Ottomans arrived in Yemen in around 1540 with the objectives of protecting the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and safeguarding the trade routes to India. Even then, Egypt's Ottoman governor described Yemen as a land in a condition of constant turmoil and anarchy.[7]

Northern Yemen became independent of the Ottoman Empire only after World War I; from then it was under the rule of hereditary Imams until the 1962 revolution. The toppling of the Imam heralded the beginning of a long civil war in which the old order were supported by conservative Saudi Arabia and the new by socialist Egypt. Several long-standing patterns of Yemeni military politics were established already in the Ottoman era or during the Imamate. First, the army formed by Imam Yahya (1904-1948) relied to a large extent on *tribal mercenaries* under the command of their own leaders, the colonel sheikhs. The tribal mercenaries were recruited on an *ad hoc* basis as military campaigns against Yahya's numerous enemies – various tribes, Saudis in the north, the British in the south, etc. – necessitated. Yahya's forces were complemented and, in large part, trained by former Turkish officers who stayed in Yemen following the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire in 1918. Before the creation of this army there was only an Imamic bodyguard (*al-ukfah*) charged with the protection Yahya's regime.[8]

A second attribute of Yemeni military affairs that emerged already in this period and has continued to characterize them ever since is the *institutional fragmentation* of the armed forces. Owing to his fears regarding the reliability of Turkish officers, Yahya established a parallel army, the Army of Defense (*Jaysh al-Difa*) and appointed a Syrian officer, Tahseen Pasha as its head. Yahya created yet another force, the *Jaysh al-Barani* (the Desert Army), an irregular militia of tribesmen from the Zaydi highlands in the north, which were supplemented by two battalions of guards who were supposed to protect the Imam himself.[9] In other words, by the early 1930s the Imamate maintained no fewer than four separate armed organizations, foreshadowing the multiple military entities of the future.

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A third pattern, the reliance on violent *coups d'état* to resolve political conflicts, and leadership succession was also established early on. Owing, in part, to his capricious rule, Yahya's son and successor, Imam Ahmad (1948-1962) was the subject of numerous coup- and assassination attempts. In 1955, for instance, the Iraqi trained Colonel Ahmad Thalaya led an ultimately failed revolt to overthrow the imam. Like his father, Ahmad was profoundly conservative but he forged alliances with and received substantial military aid from socialist states (the USSR, China, and Egypt). In 1958, North Yemen even joined the United Arab Republic (a short-lived political union of Egypt and Syria) as a member of the United Arab State. Yemen's participation in the federation had little substance but it did ensure Cairo's goodwill toward the Imamate.

A fourth pattern, the *deep mistrust* of armed forces personnel – a problem the purposeful fragmentation of the military establishment was supposed to solve – was also illustrated by Imam Ahmad's tenure. As coup prevention strategies, he carried the keys to the arsenals on his person and kept the training and equipment of his soldiers to a very basic level.[10] Under Ahmad, the royal guard had grown to about 3,000-4,000 fighters and became the core of a regular army, roughly organized along Western lines. In September 1962 he died of wounds received from an attempt on his life and was succeeded by his eldest son, Muhammad al-Badr. The new Imam's reign lasted merely a week. On September 26, 1962, Abdullah al-Sallal, whom Muhammad al-Badr appointed Commander of the Royal Guard only a few days earlier, staged a coup, named himself president, and proclaimed the Yemen Arab Republic.

Southern Yemen did not become independent for another five years. The British, after decades of engagement in the south of the country – particularly in the port city of Aden and in surrounding areas – turned it into a Crown Colony in 1937. In spite of opposition from the Imamate in the north, Britain established a Federation of South Arabian Emirates in 1959 with six sheikhdoms; nine others joined three years later. The rest of the tribal states formed the Protectorate of South Yemen. Their combined territories became South Yemen, also known as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, following the British withdrawal in 1967. The boundaries between the two Yemens were not clearly demarcated until independence. In some areas, Yemen's eastern frontier with Saudi Arabia is still contested.

The Armed Forces of South Yemen (1967-90)

South Yemen arose from the four-year (1963-67) struggle against British colonial rule, also known as the Aden Emergency, that was inspired in part by the revolution in North Yemen.[11] The National Liberation Front (of southern Yemen) was formed in 1963 and consisted of nine organizations, one of which was the Secret Organization of Free Officers and Soldiers, mostly made up of Yemenis who fought in the Saudi armed forces.[12] At independence, on 30 November 1967, South Yemen's leading body, the General Command of the Political Organization of the National Front, or briefly National Front (NF), was composed of about 3,500 people. One of the decisive factors for the NF's political supremacy was the support it enjoyed from the officer corps of the armed forces that were significantly expanded in the last few years of British rule. The post-independence regime replaced the army established by the British with a national army.

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The PDRY became a socialist state that throughout its quarter-century-long existence struggled to establish, enlarge, and safeguard central authority in what remained a society strongly influenced by tribal identities and affiliations. South Yemen's conservative society steadfastly resisted the type of close control its Marxist-Leninist regime was intent on exercising over a population with age-old tribal allegiances. Still, the PDRY leaders were not above "playing the tribal card." For instance, especially the higher echelons of the officer corps of its armed forces, known as the Popular Defense Forces (PDF), was dominated by the tribe of Abdul Fattah Ismail, the PDRY's *de facto* leader from 1969-80 (as well as president and the leader of the Yemeni Socialist Party in 1978-80). Neither could the country's leadership prevent tribal animosities from reaching the stage of violent conflict: for instance, a month-long tribal war in 1988 resulted in 10,000 deaths.

Civil-military relations in South Yemen followed the general trends in overall regime politics. In 1967-80 South Yemen had become progressively more leftist with the 1969 overthrow of Qahtan Al-Sha'bi, the country's first president; the 1971 ousting of the moderate Marxist Prime Minister, Muhammad Ali Haytham; and the 1978 overthrow of the radical President Salim Rubai Ali by the hardline Abdul Fattah Ismail who, in turn, established the Yemeni Socialist Party, a model Marxist-Leninist vanguard party. In 1980, Ismail was replaced by the more moderate Ali Nasir Muhammad who remained the YSP's leader until 1986. Because most of these leadership changes signified alterations of the regime's political course, they were accompanied not just by social and political upheavals of varying magnitude, but also, true to Soviet practice, by extensive purges of the security sector, especially of the military proper, particularly in 1969 and 1978.

Coup-proofing and the diversification of the defense sector took different forms in South Yemen. In 1972 the regime established a Popular Militia that in a few years became a major part of the defense establishment and by 1983 grew to nearly 30,000 members.[13] The expressed goal of the Popular (alternatively referred to as People's) Militia was the defense of the regime. It focused its recruitment efforts in the provinces among committed National Front supporters and received training mostly from Cubans. The NF Secretariat created the Popular Defense Committees, in 1973. Their tasks, based on the Cuban model, were to solve people's problems on the neighborhood level. Still, their educational and welfare functions were complemented with security duties.[14] The approximately 15,000-strong Public Security Forces, a cross between a police and a gendarmerie, was an effective supporter of the regime and a vigilant opponent of its enemies.[15] The regular army, the People's Defense Forces (PDF), consisted of about 25,000 soldiers in the late 1970s. Conscripts, who were drafted for two years, made up the army's non-professional personnel. The PDF was divided into a mechanized brigade, ten infantry brigades, and an air defense regiment. Both the army and the small navy (a 500-person force) were equipped mostly with Soviet weapons. The air force was entirely dependent on Soviet trainers, aircraft, supervision, and technical support.

During its little-over two decades of existence, South Yemen's army saw action against foreign adversaries on several occasions. Once the Marxist regime consolidated its power within the country, it turned its attention to the Dhofar Rebellion (1962-76) in neighboring Oman. South Yemen supported the rebels, facilitated the transfer of aid originating from the Soviet Union, and sent volunteers – both from Yemen, and leftists

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and Nasserites of all hues from other Arab countries, including Bahrain[16] – to fight alongside the National Democratic Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf. Tensions between the two countries eased little even after the rebellion, in part due to the construction of a military air base by Soviet Bloc personnel in South Yemen at Al-Ghaydah, less than 60 miles from the Omani border.[17] The PDF was also involved in separate border wars against the Yemen Arab Republic in 1972 and 1979 and performed fairly well. In 1979, especially, the PDF made quick gains, profiting from Soviet training, although once North Yemeni tribal militias joined the fight and the US began to airlift supplies to northern forces, a stalemate was quickly reached. The five-week long war ended in a ceasefire mediated by the Arab League in Kuwait, where both sides pledged to work toward the goal of unification.[18]

The PDF's increasing politicization reflected the regime's growing ideological rigidity in the 1970s and 1980s and the effective indoctrination efforts of the approximately 400-500 Soviet advisers in South Yemen. Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) organizations became more influential within the security sector and especially in the PDF. Political commissars were appointed to all major units, and proper Marxist-Leninist credentials had become progressively more important among recruitment and promotion criteria. By the end of the PDRY era, the PDF in many respects had become similar to other Soviet-type armies.

Given its increasingly Soviet style, structure, and the regime's political orientation, the army played a similarly important role in domestic politics as other Arab armies, but not as an agent of state-building but as an unwitting arbitrator of ideological currents. The political leadership was often deeply divided, frequently on ideological matters, and the commanders of military units, who supported different sides of the quarrel. The best example is the South Yemen Civil War of January 1986 that emerged as a result of ideological and tribal tensions between two YSP factions. The two-week long conflict was extraordinarily costly: as many as 10,000 people – mostly members of the party, the army, and the militia – were killed (the official figure was 4,330) and physical damages reached over $140 million, roughly equivalent to a fifth of all foreign aid received since independence.[19] The upshot was the defeat of Prime Minister Ali Nasir Muhammad, the death of Abdul Fattah Ismail along with 55 senior YSP figures, and the succession of Ali Salim al-Beidh, an Ismail ally, who took over the party leadership. Importantly, the USSR refused to assist either side, a position Moscow had increasingly embraced in the domestic conflicts of its allies during Mikhail Gorbachev's presidency.

The Soviet Union, the PDRY's Cold War patron, had a tremendous impact on South Yemen's economic development.[20] Moscow, eager to establish a strategic foothold on the Arabian Peninsula, also derived major benefits from its relationship with South Yemen. The USSR used Yemeni military facilities and was the source of most of the PDRY's weaponry.[21] According to some estimates, in 1967-85 Moscow provided arms to South Yemen worth US$2.2 billion.[22] South Yemen's defense expenditures averaged 17.2% of the GDP in the mid-1980s, far higher than the corresponding YAR figure (10.8%.)[23] Although the Soviet military did not maintain ground forces in the country, its navy used Aden as a refueling station and a convenient place to change crews. The Soviets also took advantage of Yemeni facilities to showcase their airlift capabilities – in October 1979, for instance, they flew in 10,000 troops with armored vehicles and artillery

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pieces on temporary deployment in the PDRY and Ethiopia.[24] At the same time, thousands of Yemeni officers received training in the Soviet Union throughout the PDRY period. Soviet personnel worked alongside comrades from Cuba (as many as 600 advisers) and East Germany, the latter mainly responsible for training and advice on matters relating to police and internal intelligence.

The Yemen Arab Republic and Its Army

Abdullah al-Sallal was one of the thirteen Yemeni cadets who received military training at the Iraqi Military Academy in the late 1930s and returned to their homeland in 1940. At least half of the members of this group were later involved in conspiratorial and insurrectionist activities.[25] After overthrowing Imam Muhammad al-Badr, Sallal became president, prime minister, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and the head of the Revolutionary Command Council. Sallal and his associates believed, similarly to their colleagues in Libya and the Sudan, that their modernization drive should roughly imitate that of Nasserite Egypt.[26] Nasser, a personal friend of Sallal, not only encouraged the 1962 coup – the culmination of a lengthy Egyptian-Yemeni conspiracy – but a few days after the Imamate was overthrown, landed 5,000 Egyptian troops in Sana'a to ensure Sallal's hold on power. In the meantime, however, the Imam refused to surrender to the Nasserite "revolution" and, became the leader of the opposition that soon received much-needed military and economic support from Saudi Arabia. An interesting twist of fate is, as we shall see below, that since the 2000s the Saudis have been fighting the descendants of the Zaydi Imam.

In the North Yemen Civil War (1962-70) the main supporters of Imam al-Badr's Kingdom of Yemen were Saudi Arabia – whose King Faisal bin Abdulaziz was loath to see a pro-socialist state on the Arabian Peninsula – as well as Jordan and the UK. The royalist side consisted of tens of thousands of tribesmen to complement its smaller, perhaps 15-20,000 strong semi-regular troops. Expatriate French officers trained many of these tribal fighters in Saudi Arabia. The royalists also employed hundreds of mercenaries – many of whom served as instructors – from Belgium, Britain, France, Pakistan, and the PDRY. Sallal's Republican side mainly relied on a large Egyptian military contingent – that at times numbered as many as 70,000 soldiers[27] – supplemented by its own much smaller forces. The Republican air force leaned heavily on volunteer pilots from Syria particularly after one of the Soviet pilots supporting their cause was shot down, ending Moscow's participation.

The Saudis were concerned both with the large Egyptian buildup south of their border and the potential appeal of Nasserism to their citizens. Riyadh and Cairo negotiated a withdrawal from Yemen in August 1965. Egypt's intervention had far-reaching negative consequences for its stature in the Arab world.[28] The conflict revealed both that the relatively well-equipped and well-trained Egyptian army was unable to defeat a much smaller insurgency and that the seemingly ragtag tribal forces of northern Yemen should not be taken lightly. In addition, Egypt had paid a heavy price in both blood – all told, 26,000 of its soldiers were killed in Yemen – and treasure.[29] The last Egyptian soldiers left North Yemen on November 29, 1967, the same day the last contingent of British commandos flew out of South Yemen, symbolizing both country's independence.

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Sallal lost power the way he gained it: by military coup. In 1967 while in Baghdad, he was overthrown by his colleagues who established a three-man Presidential Council and never permitted him to return. In the presidency, he was followed by Abdul Rahman al-Iryani, the only YAR leader who was not a military man. Al-Iryani opposed both Egyptian and Saudi intervention in Yemen's domestic affairs. During his seven-year tenure, "tribal penetration of all state institutions, including the military, reached its apex."[30] He supported the recruitment of tribal sheikhs and their soldiers into the military and other security sector organizations, appointing so-called "colonel sheikhs" to command a number of the YAR army's important units. In addition, Al-Iryani " "institutionalized" many tribal-based armed groups formed during the civil war as components of the regular army that was just being developed. The rationale behind the policy to attract tribal leaders and their men into the armed forces was both the desire to nurture tribal loyalties to the new state and to expand the state's reach into tribal areas – particularly in the northern Saada Governorate.[31] These measures amplified tribal presence and influence in the military. They had serious drawbacks, however, most importantly that tribal ties tended to trump every other relationship and color every interaction in the armed forces.

Like the reign of his predecessors, al-Iryani's presidency also ended in a coup led by Colonel Ibrahim al-Hamdi. In contrast to his predecessor, Hamdi represented the centralizing current in Yemeni politics, eager to expand state power and reduce the tribal forces' military and political influence. His objective, followed more or less consistently throughout his tenure (1974-77), was to build a modern army where the soldiers' primary loyalty was to the state not to their tribes. Hamdi called this valiant but ultimately unsuccessful effort "Revolutionary Corrective Initiative." Not surprisingly, tribal leaders observed this shift in policy with growing alarm. President Hamdi was assassinated, allegedly by Abdullah al-Ahmar, the leader of the Hashid tribal confederation and the most powerful tribal sheikh in Yemen at the time.[32]

After brief stints by two interim leaders, in 1978 a 32-year old army lieutenant colonel, Ali Abdullah Saleh, was selected as the YAR's new president. Saleh came from the Bayt al-Affash clan of the Sanhan tribe, a sub-section of the Hashid tribal confederation. He became influential already during Hamdi's tenure and used his clout to place his tribesmen into strategically important positions in the army. Once Saleh ascended to the presidency, he continued this effort – facilitated, ironically, by the availability of positions left open due to Hamdi's centralizing initiative that reduced tribal personnel – and succeeded in creating a tight support base. At the top of this base was a clique that included Saleh's brother, Mohammed Saleh al-Ahmar, his first (paternal) cousin, Ali Mohsen Saleh al-Ahmar (henceforth, Ali Mohsen), who was to play such an important role in the future, and a growing number of other family members.

Saleh was the main beneficiary of the cease-fire agreement concluding the aforementioned 1979 war between North Yemen and South Yemen. The accord allowed him to consolidate his power by building up his regime and cementing the support of the northern tribes in the Hashid and Bakil tribal confederations, the two most important tribal entities in northern Yemen.[33] In practice, this meant appointing low-ranking tribal leaders from his Sanhan tribe to head most military units; in a short time, they occupied 70% of the commanding post in various security sector institutions.[34] Within a few years

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of taking power, the military had become for Saleh a critical tool of regime control and a major part of his patronage network. As in many other authoritarian states in the Arab world and beyond, professional competence had taken a backseat to other considerations in military careers. The main factors in appointment and promotion were first, loyalty to Saleh; second, membership in his tribe; and third, regional background (needed for some semblance of regional balancing).

Saleh also began to build parallel forces both as coup-prevention measures and to create positions for his family and tribesmen. He took control of the Republican Guard (RG) that was established in 1964 and modeled after its Egyptian namesake. The RG's heavily armed and well-trained forces – initially by Egyptian and then by Iraqi advisers – were concentrated around the capital indicating their primary function as defenders of the regime. In the late 1970s the RG was made up of about 5,000 soldiers, but once Saleh took over, its size began to expand rapidly. Equally astute – as he was to prove over and over again – in balancing and manipulating tribal allies and foreign states, a year after coming to power Saleh accepted a large Soviet military assistance package while also receiving arms, supplies, and training from Saudi Arabia and the United States.[35]

The armed forces' involvement in economic activities began in the middle of the 1970s, at first mainly in the construction industry and as a participant in joint ventures. Soon after he came to power, Saleh began to enhance the military's economic role and shifted its profile to the foreign trade sector, including export-import activities and currency transactions. The army's main company – the Military Economic Corporation (MECO) renamed Yemeni Economic Corporation in 1999 – enjoyed tax-exempt status and had its separate (and undeclared) budget. The military's economic participation served several functions. It allowed Saleh to expand his capacity to dole out further favors, consolidate his patronage system, create new revenue streams for the army, and to enhance his personal wealth. In time it turned many senior officers in the security sector into millionaires.

Tribalism and the Military

Tribal, sectarian, and regional identities have been of paramount importance of and they are essential to understand Yemeni politics and military affairs. This is especially true to northern Yemen where tribal loyalties were manipulated and/or exploited by the central government for many decades. At the same time, tribal leaders were equally skilled in getting the best deal for themselves from competing bidders in the many conflicts in which their participation was sought.[36] During the civil war in the 1960s, for instance, many tribal leaders held key military commands, especially after Egypt's withdrawal in 1967. On the other side, however, the Imams did not grant tribal sheikhs administrative positions, perhaps because they understood better that their foremost allegiance would always remain to their tribes.[37] Socialist South Yemen was ideologically opposed to tribalism and did its best to eradicate or at least weaken it. Although this PDRY policy was by no means entirely successful, tribal loyalties and tribalism, in general, are less robust in contemporary southern Yemen than in the north. That said, throughout Yemeni history many areas of the country have remained essentially impenetrable to the reach of central authority.

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One can distinguish between two kinds of tribal sheikhs in Yemen. The first group is composed of sheikhs based on blood ties and lineage (*Shukyukh al-Dam*) who are most prevalent in the mountainous regions of northern Yemen. The authority of the other groups' leaders, however, is based on territory (*Shukyukh al-Ard*). They dominate the agricultural plains where they have been, in essence, feudal lords to their tribesmen who traded farm-work for food, shelter, and protection.[38] These tribal identities often, but not always, coincide with sectarian differences. The people in the mountains of northern Yemen tend to be Zaydites, practicing a form of Shiism quite different from that practiced in Iran. The majority of Yemenis are Shafiites, one of the four sub-sects of Sunni Islam, who were considered inferior under the Imamate.[39] It is noteworthy that historically, sectarian differences were seldom a source of conflict, they never fougtht a religious war, and, in fact, in impoverished areas Zaydites and Shafiites even shared the use of mosques. Hostilities between them were magnified only relatively recently, given the northern Houthi tribes' Zaydi religion and the fierce Saudi opposition to Shiism, no matter what shape it might take. Although the sheikhs' tribal identity may only be one of several identities they possess – they could also be merchants, high-ranking military officers, political party leaders – ultimately, it tends to be the strongest. As Saleh himself once said, "As an army officer I can be sacked, just like any government employee can be sacked. As a member of my tribe, however, I remain forever."[40]

Such multiple roles well described perhaps the quintessential Yemeni tribal leader, Abdullah al-Ahmar (1933-2007). First and foremost, Ahmar was the influential head of the Hashid tribal federation, a position he inherited from his father, Husayn. For the last 14 years of his life Ahmar was also the Speaker of the Assembly of Representatives, the Yemeni legislature. He was one of the four founders of the Islamist Al-Islah Party, an organization that is better described as a loose coalition of tribal and religious components.[41] Ahmar was also a multimillionaire businessmen and the chairman of the Al-Ahmar Commercial Group. The main focus of this enterprise has been the arms trade. According to a Saleh loyalist, the president encouraged Ahmar's commercial activities in order to prevent him from focusing his energies on politics.[42] Abdullah al-Ahmar was widely considered the second most important political figure in Yemen. Upon his death in a Riyadh hospital, the *most* important person, Saleh, declared three days of mourning. Abdullah's son, Sadiq (born in 1956), inherited his father's mantle as head of the Hashid federation. He is also the leader of the Islamist Islah party. Sadiq's brother, Hamid (born in 1967), is also a politician – they both were members of Yemen's legislature – but his main endeavors have been business related.

As we have seen, the various iterations of the Yemeni state have attempted to recruit or attract tribal sheikhs and their fighters into the "official" army, usually with the hope that these soldiers – motivated by money as well as various kinds of benefits and perquisites – would shift their primary allegiances from their tribe to the Yemeni Army (YA) itself. This has *not* happened. In modern Yemen, up until after the 2011 uprising, most high-ranking military leaders came from Saleh's Sanhan tribe, regardless of their qualifications. Tribal leaders, particularly from Yemen's northern Saada Governorate, used to send at least one of their sons to domestic or foreign military academies to receive advanced training. Although few of them made their career in the military, many joined one of the security sector institutions as reserve officers.[43] On lower levels, tribal elders tend to identify youngsters whom they select to join the military, police, or another

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institution in the regime' coercive apparatus. These individuals would become an important link between their tribe and the state.

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